

# COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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taken from the source material. Both the philosophy and the database of the dictionary have led to an approach to materials design that is usually termed the 'lexical syllabus'. One course based directly on the COBUILD work covers about 2,500 words over the three levels of the course (Collins, 1989). Its central claim is that the lexical database provides 'a rich input of *real* language', thus giving authenticity and context to the tasks and exercises. Each unit has a set of lexical objectives, so that by the end of unit 15 ('Newspapers') of the third level, for example, students should have learned 44 new words, making a cumulative total of 625 for this level so far. (In this particular unit, items include 'arrest', 'bomb', 'criticize', 'explode', 'explosion', 'headline', 'identity', 'target', 'violence' etc.) COBUILD has subsequently spawned a good deal of further practice material, in particular on grammar and usage.

### *The task-based approach*

Approaches to task-based learning (TBL) can be seen as a significant further evolution of communicative language teaching, both in terms of views of language in use and the development of classroom methodology. Although teachers have been operating with the notion for some time, it is only in recent years that frameworks have become more explicit and formalized. J. Willis (1996: 23) offers a simple definition: 'tasks are always activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose . . . *in order to achieve an outcome*' (italics added). In other words, TBL is goal-oriented, leading to a 'solution' or a 'product'. Nunan (1989, cited in 1999: 25) makes a further distinction between 'real-world' and 'pedagogical' tasks, the latter defined as 'a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than manipulate form.'

Despite this emphasis on communication and interaction, it is important to note that the TBL approach is concerned with accuracy as well as fluency. It achieves this most obviously through the TBL framework, which has three key phases:

- 1 the pre-task phase, which includes work on introducing the topic, finding relevant language and so on
- 2 the task cycle itself
- 3 language focus.

As Willis notes (ibid: 55), 'to avoid the risk of learners achieving fluency at the expense of accuracy and to spur on language development, another stage is needed after the task itself'. TBL, then, takes a holistic view of language in use. Willis also offers an extensive set of suggestions for task possibilities, from

simple to complex, and also shows how mainstream textbooks can be adapted to introduce tasks. A simple task may require learners just to make lists (for example, 'the features of a famous place'); more complex tasks may incorporate simulation and problem-solving, such as how to plan a dinner menu on a limited budget (Willis's examples).

Before leaving this section, it is worth noting that TBL has also generated some critical comment. Seedhouse (1999), for instance, whilst not rejecting the approach outright, used TBL lesson transcripts, which, he claimed, showed that language use is not always particularly rich, with some tendency to 'minimalisation' and rather limited discourse. His conclusion is that TBL needs to be incorporated into language pedagogy but should not be the sole approach used.

Examine the following task from a mainstream coursebook. Try to characterize the nature of the task, and comment on its design from the point of view of both 'fluency' and 'accuracy'.

## Part B Task

Prepare a review or  
entertainment guide

Task link: 'extreme' adjectives

### Personal vocabulary

### Preparation for task

- 1 The words in the box are all things you might hear on the radio. Complete the gaps in the sentences below with one of the words.

review    phone-in    entertainment guide    advert

- a An ..... tries to persuade people to buy goods or services.
- b In a ..... a critic gives his / her opinion of a new film, book, play, etc.
- c In a ..... people call the radio station to express their opinions or ask questions.
- d An ..... tells you where and when you can see films, concerts, etc.

- 2 [6.5] You are going to hear four extracts from radio programmes. Listen and write what each extract is, using a word from the box in Exercise 1.

a ..... b ..... c ..... d .....

- 3 Listen again and answer the following questions.

- a What three types of music are mentioned in the entertainment guide?
- b What other form of entertainment does she talk about?
- c What kind of film is being advertised?
- d What is the phone-in about?
- e Is the reviewer talking about a book, a play or a film? Is she generally positive or negative about it?

## Task

You are going to prepare an item for a radio programme. You can choose:

either a review of a television programme, film, video, play, concert or CD that you have seen or heard recently.

or an entertainment guide to cinemas, theatres, concerts, etc. in your local area, or a guide to programmes on television over the next few days.

Make your choice and then read the appropriate instructions.

## Entertainment guide

• Work in pairs. Try to choose programmes, films, plays, etc. that you think will interest the other students. If possible, choose things that you know something about. Include both factual information and reasons why you recommend it.

• Spend about fifteen minutes preparing your entertainment guide. Do not write it out word for word, but make notes about what you are going to say. Look at the phrases in the *Useful language* box. Ask your teacher about any words or phrases you need and write them in the *Personal vocabulary* box.

## Useful language

"If you like ... you should try / go to / see ..."

"It's on at ..."

"It starts / finishes at ..."

"It's about ..."

"It stars ..."

"It's written / directed by ..."

"It looks good / interesting / exciting / unusual / fun ..."

"There are ... performances every day. Tickets are on sale at ..."

"You can get more information from ..."

## Useful language

"It's about ..."

"It stars ..."

"It's set in ..."

"It was written / directed / produced by ..."

"The story / acting / photography is ... excellent / not very good ..."

"The thing I liked best about it was ..."

"Another thing I really liked was ..."

"The thing I didn't like was ..."

"I'd recommend it to people who like ..."

## Review

• Work on your own. Try to choose a programme, film, etc. that you think will interest the other students. (Ideally it will be something recent.) Include both factual information (where you saw it / what it's about / who's in it, etc.) and your opinion of it.

• Spend about fifteen minutes preparing your review. Do not write it out word for word, but make notes about what you are going to say. Look at the phrases in the *Useful language* box. Ask your teacher about any words or phrases you need and write them in the *Personal vocabulary* box.

2 Either: present your review or entertainment guide to the class. The other students should listen and note down:

- which films, programmes, etc. they would like to see.
- any questions they would like to ask.

or: make a radio programme of your own called *News and Reviews*. Record your entertainment guides and reviews onto a cassette. Decide:

- what order to put the items in.
- who is going to be the radio announcer and what he / she will say.

## Optional writing

Write a review of the film, play, etc. you have already described, or another one you are interested in.

In this section we have discussed the principle of the multi-syllabus, have shown how some coursebooks have highlighted vocabulary as one particular area of design, and have commented on the task-based approach as an important area of development. In the next section we shall turn our attention to ways in which current approaches view the learners themselves.

### 3.5 *Learners and learning*

There are a number of ways in which current coursebook design is concerned in general terms with a perspective on 'the learner', as well as with the language material itself. These ways can be grouped as follows:

- 1 Although the majority of learners study in the environment of a whole class, and often in a large one, an analysis of the characteristics of learners as individuals can offer a helpful view on the construction of materials and methods.
- 2 Learners will naturally need to engage in the process of both comprehending and producing language. In doing this they use a range of strategies, some of which are probably shared by all language users, whether learning a foreign language or using their mother tongue.

The first of these perspectives is normally characterized by the concept of 'individual differences'; the second is studied under the headings of both language acquisition and learning strategies. Skehan (1989) points out that the one is a view of *differences*, the other of *similarities* and *universals*. Both perspectives have come into some prominence as factors affecting materials design, and we shall briefly survey each of them in turn.

#### *Learners*

In the previous section on the organization and content of current materials, we did not discuss in any detail the selection of topics for language practice, whether for discussion, or comprehension, or writing. We have chosen to start this section with them because they are the most obvious way in which learners' needs and interests can be taken into account. The possibilities for topic choice are potentially so wide that a meaningful classification is difficult. Themes may or may not be drawn from a source of 'authentic' language data; they may come from the field of world affairs, or medicine, or sport, from social and family life, from everyday topics, and from other areas too many to enumerate. Here is a small selection of themes taken from some of the coursebooks used as examples in the preceding section. You might like to consider whether such topics would be relevant for your own learners, and whether learning context determines topic choice. For instance, materials appropriate for students in an English-